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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV

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SUBJECT: THAI PRIME MINISTER SKIPS LUNCH DATE WITH ASSEMBLY OF THE POOR

11. (U) SUMMARY: Newly sworn-in Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra disappointed a three-day gathering of mostly rural villagers from the Assembly of the Poor NGO by going on vacation in Japan rather than stopping by for lunch. The 900-strong peaceful demonstration in front of Thailand's Parliament attracted some media attention and some prominent political opposition figures, but was mostly ignored by Members of Parliament. A nearly nonstop array of speakers addressed the protesters and called for greater public participation in decision-making on large scale development projects and for Thaksin to make good on promises he made in his first administration. END SUMMARY.

PEACEFUL RALLY FEATURES VARIETY OF SPEAKERS AND ISSUES

12. (U) A group of approximately 900 grassroots demonstrators from about 30 of Thailand's 76 provinces gathered for three days in front of Parliament in Bangkok to press for a greater voice for ordinary people in the democratic process. Organized by the NGO Assembly of the Poor and seven other local NGOs, villagers traveled to Bangkok from all parts of Thailand via bus on the night of March 14 and set up a small stage with a few microphones on the sidewalk across the double lane street from the front gate of Thailand's Parliament building. They camped out under blue plastic tarps on either side of the stage and sat on straw mats interspersed with small charcoal grills used to cook pots of rice and fish. They endured temperatures of over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and an unusual heavy rain on the morning of March 16 added a thick humidity to the already steamy atmosphere. The Assembly of the Poor, a nationwide NGO, is comprised of over 200 smaller grassroots organizations concerned about various government programs that have led to land use disputes.

13. (U) Poloff spoke to Assembly of the Poor organizers Somkhuan Phromthong and Wannida Tantiwitthayapitak who told him that they originally planned to hold the rally in early January during the February 6 general election campaign. But the December 26, 2004 tsunami affected many of the member groups from Phuket and Phangnga provinces, so the earlier plans had to be postponed. The organizers said that for this demonstration they had received good cooperation from the City of Bangkok, which provided drinking water and mobile toilet facilities. They also had no complaints about the police or other security officials, whom Poloff observed taking pictures of his movements and conversations from across the street. Somkhuan did say they had been fined 200 baht (\$5.25) for making too much noise the first day but had not been troubled by police since paying the fine.

FAMOUS GRANDMA ACTIVIST MISSES LUNCH WITH THE PM

14. (U) One of the featured speakers and organizers at the rally was a Northeast Thailand legend known as "Yai Hai" or Grandma Hai from Ubolratchathani Province. Her twenty-year struggle to reclaim her farm, which she claimed had been illegally taken from her for a government dam project, has been featured in local and international media as a victory for grassroots organizing in rural Southeast Asia. She asked why the Prime Minister had turned down the Assembly's offer for lunch remarking, "He likes 'plaa tip' (raw fish, meaning sushi) more than 'plaa taek' (Northeastern fish paste)." The Prime Minister had departed for Japan on a family vacation the day before and did not stop by the rally or send a representative to meet with the villagers. Yai Hai did testify to the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Human and Social Welfare about rural economic issues. Notably absent from the rally, according to its organizers, were Members of Parliament from any of the provinces or areas represented by the demonstrators, except for one Thai Rak Thai MP from Lamphun Province. Some noted Thai Senators, such as Thaksin critics Kraisak Choonhavan, Chermasak Pinthong and Democrat Party Leader MP Abhisit Vejjajiva did stop by the rally to listen and show their support.

KEEPING WATCH ON THAI RAK THAI

15. (U) The Assembly of the Poor speakers presented a wide array of grievances against the government, but all

reiterated the need for increased citizen participation in the democratic process. Many complained of environmental problems associated with locating of coal fired power plants or industries, such as paper mills near their homes. Others spoke about misuse of development funds and of policies to develop the country at the expense of the forests, water and other natural resources. One group opposed the joint venture Thai-Malaysia pipeline in southern Thailand, claiming government corruption in land allocation for laying the pipeline. Wannida noted that Thaksin's populist policies, such as the 2003 war on drugs, or the 30-baht health scheme, were quick fixes or "tiger balm" (a soothing Asian medicinal rubbing balm) that temporarily allayed public worries but did not provide systemic solutions to social problems. On March 17, the group will submit recommendations to the Parliament and hold a press conference. They also plan to release a set of alternative national policy objectives once the Thaksin government reveals its policy planning statement in Parliament on March 23. Most important, the Assembly for the Poor will establish a People's Social Policy Monitoring Committee to assess the effect of government infrastructure projects on villagers in the hope of serving as a check on Thaksin's large majority in the Thai parliament.

A MISSED OPPORTUNITY?

16. (SBU) Comment. Less than one week after stating in his inaugural address that he would seek greater public participation in the democratic process in Thailand, Thaksin has missed an excellent opportunity to make good on his words. While his snub of the lunch offer from the grassroots Assembly of the Poor has not resulted in massive criticism or rowdy demonstrations, he has let down a group of down-home country Thai folks committed to their families and communities and to participating in the future of Thailand. New Democrat Party Leader did not miss his chance to demonstrate that he will keep an ear open to their critiques of Thaksin administration policies. End Comment.
BOYCE